AS MUCH TRUTH AS ONE CAN BEAR

To Speak Out About the World as It Is, Says James Baldwin, Is the Writer's Job

By JAMES BALDWIN

SINCE World War II, certain names in recent American literature—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Faulkner—have acquired such weight and become so sacrosanct that they have been used as touchstones to reveal the understandable, but lamentable, inadequacy of the younger literary artists. We still hear complaints, for example, that World War II failed to produce a literary harvest comparable to that which we garnered from the first. We will discuss the idiocy of this complaint later.

Let one of us, the younger, attempt to create a restless, unhappy, free-wheeling heroine and we are immediately informed that Hemingway or Fitzgerald did the same thing better—infinitely better. Should we be rash enough to make any attempt to link the lives of some men with their time, we are sternly (or kindly) advised to re-read "U. S. A." It has all, it would seem, been done, by our betters and our masters. In much the same way, not so very long ago, it appeared that American poetry was destined to perish in the chill embrace of T. S. Eliot.

Neither I, nor any of my confrères, are willing to be defined or limited in this way. Not one of us suffers from an excess of modesty, and none of what follows is written in a complaining spirit. And it is certainly not my purpose here to denigrate the achievement of the four men I have named. On the contrary, I am certain that I and that handful of younger writers I have in mind have more genuine respect for this achievement than do most of their unbearably cacaphonous worshipers.

I respect Faulkner enough, for example, to be saddened by his pronouncements on the race question, to be offended by the soupy rhetoric of his Nobel Prize speech, and to resent—for *his* sake—the critical obtuseness which accepted (from the man who wrote "Light in August") such indefensibly muddy work as "Intruder in the Dust," or "Requiem for a Nun."

IT is useful, furthermore, to remember in the case of Hemingway that his reputation began to be unassailable at the very instant that his work began that decline from which it never recovered—at about the time of "For Whom the Bell Tolls." Hindsight allows us to say that this boyish and romantic and inflated book marks Hemingway's abdication from the effort to understand the many-sided evil that is in the world. This is exactly the same thing as saying that he somehow gave up the effort to become a great novelist.

I myself believe that this is the effort every novelist must make, in spite of the fact that the odds are ludicrously against him, and that he can never, after all, *know*. In my mind, the effort to become a great novelist simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more. It is an effort which, by its very nature—remembering that men write the books, that time passes and energy flags, and safety beckons—is obviously doomed to failure. Success is an American word which cannot conceivably, unless it is defined in an extremely severe, ironical and painful way, have any place in the vocabulary of any artist.

The example afforded by the later development, if one can call it that, of John Dos Passos is at least equally disturbing. And I suppose that there is no longer anything to say about Fitzgerald, at least not by me, and not now. Each of these men in his own way dramatizes for me the extraordinary hazards an American artist must run. Particularly, I must say, an American artist, whose tool is the common penny of language: who must try to deal with what words hide and what they reveal.

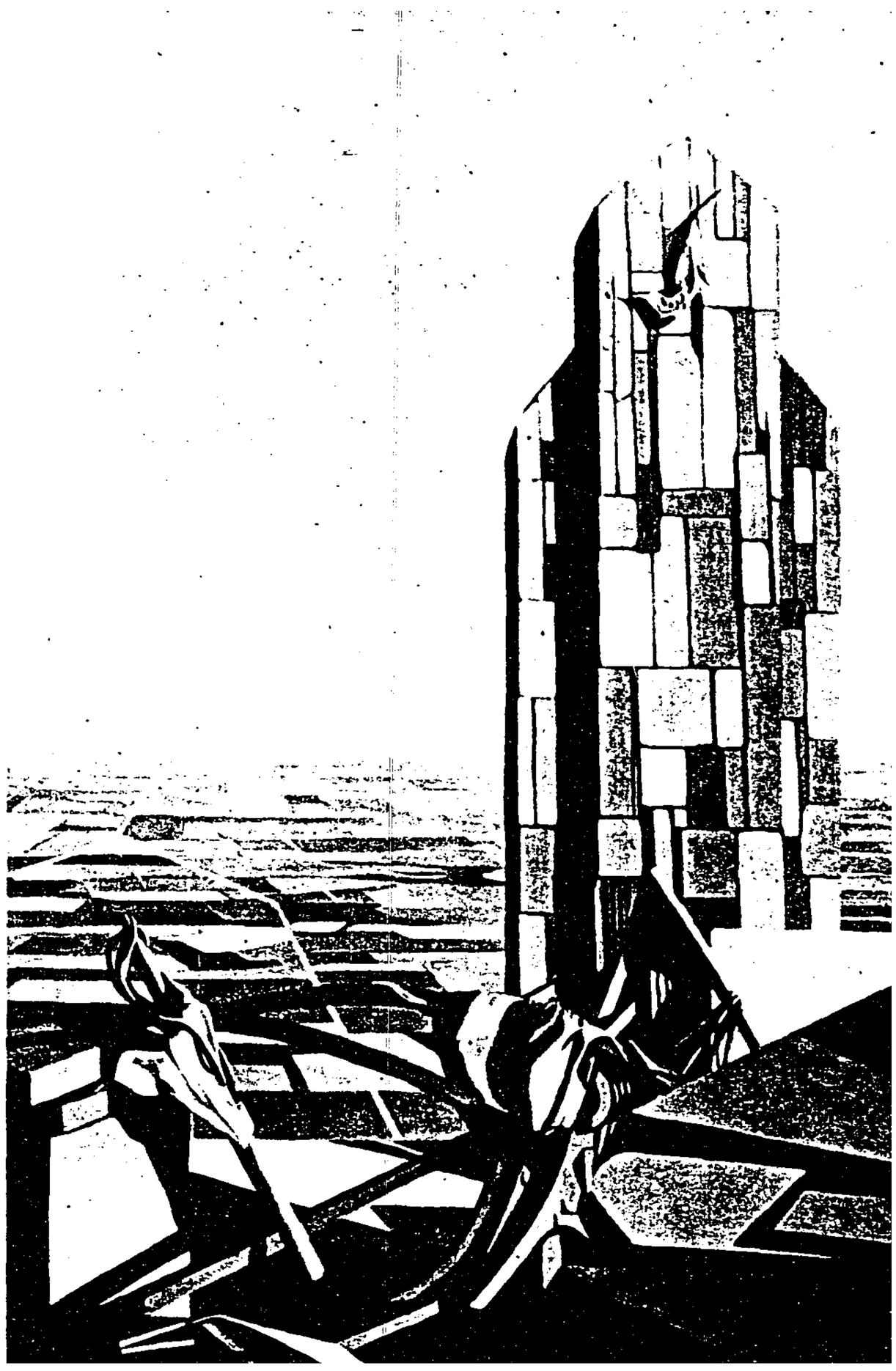
We live in a country in which words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not to wake him up; and, therefore, it seems to me, the adulation so cruelly proffered our elders has nothing to do with their achievement—which, I repeat, was mighty—but has to do with our impulse to look back on what we now imagine to have been a happier time. It is an adulation which has panic at the root.

I think that it is true, but I am willing to be corrected, that the previously mentioned giants have at least one thing in common: their simplicity. I do not refer to their styles (though indeed, flying in the face of both critic and layman, I might be) but to their way of looking on the world. It is the American way of looking on the world, as a place to be corrected, and in which innocence is inexplicably lost. It is this almost inexpressible pain which lends such force to some of the early Hemingway stories—including "The Killers" and to the marvelous fishing sequence in "The Sun Also Rises"; and it is also the reason that Hemingway's heroines seem so peculiarly sexless and manufactured.

IT is the sorrow of Gatsby, who searches for the green light, which continually recedes before him; and he never understands that the green light is there precisely in order to recede. Ben and Charley and Moorehouse and the entire cast of "U. S. A." are tricked by life in just this way; nor is there any intimation in the book that we have, all, always, lived in a world in which dreams betray, and are betrayed, where love dies, or, more unbearably, fails to die, and where innocence *must* die, if we are ever to begin that journey toward the greater innocence called wisdom.

As for the work of Faulkner, which would seem, superficially, to escape these strictures, one has only to consider his vision, running throughout his work, of the gallant South. Even when he is most appalled by the crimes of his region—by which I do not so much mean the crimes committed against Negroes as the crimes his forebears and contemporaries have committed, and do commit, against themselves—he is testing it against the vision of a failed possibility.

One hears, it seems to me, in the work of all *(Continued on Page 38)*



Detail from painting by Kay Sage. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Greenstein. Courtesy Catherine Viviano Gallery.

"All dreams were to have become possible."

Since his first semi-autobiographical book, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," Mr. Baldwin has written a novel, "Giovanni's Room" and two books of essays, "Notes of a Native Son" and "Nobody Knows My Name."

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As Much of the Truth as One Can Bear

(Continued from Page 1)

American novelists, even including the mighty Henry James, songs of the plains, the memory of a virgin continent, mysteriously despoiled, though all dreams were to have become possible here. This did not happen. And the panic, then, to which I have referred comes out of the fact that we are now confronting the awful question of whether or not all our dreams have failed. How have we managed to become what we have, in fact, become? And if we are, as, indeed, we seem to be, so empty and so desperate, what are we to do about it? How shall we put ourselves in touch with reality?

WRITERS are extremely important people in a country, whether or not the country knows it. The multiple truths about a people are revealed by that people's artists—that is what the artists are for. Whoever, for example, attempts to understand the French will be forced, sooner or later, to read Balzac. And Balzac himself, in his own personality, illustrates all those vices, conundrums, delusions, ambitions, joys, all that recklessness, caution, patience, cunning, and revenge which activate his people. For, of course, he is those people; being French, like them, they operate as his mirror and he operates as theirs. And this is also entirely true of American writers, from James Fenimore Cooper to Henry James to William Faulkner.

Is it not possible to discern, in the features of Faulkner's Lucas, the lineaments of Fenimore Cooper's Uncas? And does not Lambert Strether of James' "The Ambassadors" come out of the loins of men who conquered a continent, destroying Uncas and enslaving Lucas, in order to build a factory which produces "unmentionable" articles —and which, in the absence of any stronger force, is now ruled by a strong-minded widow? What is the moral dilemma of Lambert Strether if not that, at the midnight hour, he realizes that he has, somehow, inexplicably, failed his manhood: that the "masculine sensibility," as James puts it, has failed in him? This "masculine sensibility" does not refer to erotic activity but to the responsibility that men must take upon themselves of facing and reordering reality.

Strether's triumph is that he is able to realize this, even though he knows it is too late for him to act on it. And it is James' perception of this peculiar impossibility which makes him, until today, the greatest of our novelists. For the question which he raised, ricocheting it, so to speak, off the backs of his heroines, is the question which so torments us now. The question is this: How is an American to become a man? And this is precisely the same thing as asking: How is America to become a nation? By contrast with him, the giants who came to the fore between the two world wars merely lamented the necessity.

These two strains in American fiction—nostalgia for the loss of innocence as opposed to an ironical apprehension of what such nostalgia means—have been described, not very helpfully, as the Redskin tradition as opposed to the Paleface. This has never made any sense to me. I have never read an American writer in whom the Redskin and the Paleface were not inextricably intertwined, usually, to be sure, in dreadful battle. Consider, for example, the tormented career of the author of "Tom Sawyer." Or, for that matter, the beautiful ambiguity of the author of "Leaves of Grass." And what was Hart Crane attempting to celebrate, in his indisputably Paleface fashion, in that magnificent failure which he called "The Bridge?"

It seems to me that the truth about us, as individual men and women, and as a nation, has been, and is being recorded, whether we wish to read it or not. Perhaps we cannot read it now, but the day is coming when we will have nothing else to read. The younger writers, so relentlessly and unfavorably compared to their elders, are, nevertheless, their descendants and are under the obligation to go further than their elders went. It is the only way to keep faith with them. The real difficulty is that those very same questions, that same anguish, must now be expressed in a way that more closely corresponds to our actual condition.

IT is inane, for example, to compare the literary harvest of World War II with that of World War I—not only because we do not, after all, fight wars in order to produce literature, but also because the two wars had nothing in common. We did not know, when we fought the first war, what we were forced to discover—though we did not face it, and have not faced it yet—when we fought the second. Between 1917 and 1941, the ocean, inconceivably, had shrunk to the size of a swimming pool.

In 1917, we had no enemies; 1941 marks our reluctant discovery—which, again, we have not faced—that we had enemies everywhere. During World War I, we were able to be angry at the atrocities committed in the name of the Kaiser; but it was scarcely possible in World War II to be *angry* over the systematic slaughter of six million Jews; nor did our performance at Nuremberg do anything but muddy the moral and legal waters. In short, by the time of World War II, evil had entered the American Eden, and it had come to stay.

I am a preacher's son. I beg you to remember the proper name of that troubling tree in Eden: it is "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." What is meant by the masculine sensibility is the ability to eat the fruit of that tree, and live. What is meant by the "human condition" is that, indeed, one has no choice: eat, or die. And we are slowly discovering that there are many ways to die.

The younger American writers, then, to whom we shall, one day, be most indebted—and I shall name no names, make no prophecies—are precisely those writers who are compelled to take it upon themselves to describe us to ourselves as we now are. The loneliness of those cities described in Dos Passos is greater now than it has ever been before; and these cities are more dangerous now than they were before, and their citizens are yet more unloved. And those panaceas and formulas which have so spectacularly failed Dos Passos have also failed this country, and the world. The trouble is deeper than we wished to think: the trouble is in us. And we will never remake those cities, or conquer our cruel and unbearable human isolation—we will never establish human communities — until we stare our ghastly failure in the face.

We will never understand what motivates Chinese or Cuban peasants until we ask ourselves who *we* are, and what we are doing in this lonely place. Faulkner's South, and grandfather's slaves, have vanished: the sun will never look on them again. The curtain has come down forever on Gatsby's career: there will be no more Gatsbys. And the green hills of Africa have come out of the past, and out of the imagination, into the present, the troubling world.

Societies are never able to examine, to overhaul themselves: this effort must be made by that yeast which every society cunningly and unfailingly secretes. This ferment, this disturbance, is the responsibility, and the necessity, of writers. It is, alas, the truth that to be an American writer today means mounting an unending attack on all that Americans believe themselves to hold sacred. It means fighting an astute and agile guerrilla warfare with that American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic.

ONE must be willing, indeed, one must be anxious, to locate, precisely, that American morality of which we boast. And one must be willing to ask one's self what the Indian thinks of this morality, what the Cuban or the Chinese thinks of it, what the Negro thinks of it. Our own record must be read. And, finally, the air of this time and place is so heavy with rhetoric, so thick with soothing lies, that one must really do great violence to language, one must somehow disrupt the comforting beat, in order to be heard. Obviously, one must dismiss any hopes one may ever have had of winning a popularity contest. And one must take upon one's self the right to be entirely wrong — and accept penalties for penalties there will certainly be, even here.

"We work in the dark," said Henry James, "we do what we can, our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." This madness, thank Heaven, is still at work among us here, and it will bring, inexorably, to the light at last the truth about our despairing young, our bewildered lovers, our defeated junkies, our demoralized young executives, our psychiatrists, and politicians, cities, towns, suburbs and inter-racial housing projects. There is a thread which unites them all, and which unites every one of us. We have been both searching and evading the terms of this union for many generations.

WE are the generation that must throw everything into the endeavor to remake America into what we say we want it to be. Without this endeavor, we will perish. However immoral or subversive this may sound to some, it is the writer who must always remember that morality, if it is to remain or become morality, must be perpetually examined, cracked, changed, made new. He must remember, however powerful the many who would rather forget, that life is the only touchstone and that life is dangerous, and that without the joyful acceptance of this danger, there can never be any safety for anyone, ever, anywhere.

What the writer is always trying to do is utilize the particular in order to reveal something much larger and heavier than any particular can be. Thus Dostoevsky, in "The Possessed," used a small provincial town in order to dramatize the spiritual state of Russia. His particulars were not very attractive, but he did not invent them, he simply used what there was. Our particulars are not very attractive, either, but we must use them. They will not go away because we pretend that they are not there.

Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced. The principal fact that we must now face, and that a handful of writers are trying to dramatize, is that the time has now come for us to turn our backs forever on the big two-hearted river.

Author's Query

TO THE EDITOR:

I am working on a study of the English actress Laura Keene (1826-1873) and would appreciate hearing from those who possess, or know the whereabouts of, letters, diaries or other pertinent documents pertaining to her career.

I would also appreciate hearing from anyone knowing of the location of her descendants.

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